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Concepts of Medieval Alchemy in Alevi Music-- An Episodic Structure in the Liturgies of the Shi'ites of India and the Alevi of Turkey*

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Starting in the 1980's, a trend away from national or ideological blocs in culture has appeared. Communities that overlap national or ideological boundaries are gaining prominence. The diversity that results from this decentralization offers a good argument against social-evolutionistic claims that "the mainstream is sweeping everything in its course..." In effect, marginal faith movements, marginal professions, marginal communities, marginal social castes etc., are achieving a global level of communication with their peers in other cultural blocs. The power thus created is generating many relevant alternatives to the mainstream.

Strict national or ideological boundaries, which stem from social and political purism, are gifts of 19th century enlightenment and modernism to mankind. The present-day trend away from them, that is, the post-modernistic predilection for tranversality, is rather germaine to some medieval values squarely rejected by modernism.

In this paper, I will try to approach certain aspects of Alevi society and music through some of these values. Concepts will be borrowed from alchemy to interpret facts related to gnosticism. Three musical examples, from Turkey and India, will be examined: (a) one belonging to the *Mi'raçlama* genre of Alevi liturgical chant, performed by members of a spiritual leadership caste, i.e. the *ocak*, and (b) another one belonging to the *soz* genre of Shiite liturgical chant, widely carried on by a musicians' caste--the *mirasi* singers. Their marginality, both musically and socio-culturally, will be assessed, while a continuity between the two will be observed.

Mi'raçlama performances may sound rather dull, even unattractive, unlike other liturgical items such as *nefes,*

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duvazde, ağıt, etc. that are so pleasant to the lay audience. I hardly heard of any performance of a *Mi'raçlama* at a public concert of Alevi music.

The*Mi'raçlama* are epic chants in story-telling style, the most appreciated one being that of the Shah Hatayi the Safavid known to have organized, in the 16th century, the liturgy of the Alevi. While various genres in this liturgy obey a musical form that reflects the form of the poetry, consisting of quatrains, the *Mi'raçlama* have no consistant musical form. The chanter improvises an episodic organization within the performance situation. Thus, the number of poetry lines per episode or the number of episodes varies from performance to performance, even by a given chanter. What remains constant is the existence of a tri-partite overall organization (plus a postlude) reminiscent of a *raga* structure and, within the first one of these three parts, the existence of an undetermined number of episodes.

Overall, the Alevi chanter creates what I have named an **internal time in music (ITM)**, which stands for his specific identity, through organizing a process of change proper to his precepts of gnosticism and alchemy. Thus, to understand the episodic structure, one could relate it to the Bektaşi ideology.

The doctrine of "the four gateways," so basic to the teachings of the saint, Hacı Bektaş, is one that hinges, on the one hand, on conceiving the universe as being formed of the **elements fire, air, water and earth** and, on the other hand, on a path to be followed in Bektaşi type gnosticism: *Şeriat, Tarikat, Marifet* and *Hakikat.* Just as the four elements are in a sequence of descent, the gateways also follow a sequence from law and power to humbleness.

In the course of this path of descent, so many potential balances are present. There is a whole medieval science of the balances in works by Al-Razi (12th century), Jabir (8th century) Semnani (14th century), Buni (13th century).

The conversion of **internal time** into quantitative values had been the subject of the immense work of Jabir ibn Hayyan who died in Tus in the Khorassan in 804. He was a disciple of the sixth imam, the Imam Jafer, and adept of the eighth imam, the Imam Riza. Corbin reports about Jabir:

> The "science of the balance" proposes to discover in each body the rapport between the manifest and the hidden (the zahir and the batın, the esoteric and the 'exoteric'). As *The Book of the Arena of Intelligence (Kitab maydan al-aql)* explains at length, it aims at measuring the natures of a thing (warmth, coldness, humidity, drought), which is tantamount to measuring the quantities that the soul of the world has appropriated from each of them; i.e., the intensities of various cravings of the soul in its descent into matter: therefore, the balances *(mawazin)* are generated by a principle based on the various cravings of the soul for various natures. (Corbin, 64:186)
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> Merging the structure of bodies with the structure of the language and music, Jabir rejects the possibility that a language can be codified by an institution on the basis of random conventions; the soul of the world communicates to Nature its proper harmony; it creates various bodies submitted to numbers and quantities. The soul's harmony is expressed to Nature in the language and in music. Since this implies a close rapport between Nature and language, language is not an accident. Its justification cannot come from an institution; it derives from an intention of the soul of the world. (ibid., 205)

Centuries later, Buni (d. 1225) would voice these considerations:

> Behold, the secrets of God and the objects of his science, realities that are subtle as well as dense ones, things of up there, as well as those of down here, are of two categories: some are letters and some are numbers. The secrets of letters are in numbers and the epiphanies of numbers are in letters. Numbers are the realities of up there, that belong to spiritual entities. Letters belong to the realm of material realities, and of the becoming. (ibid., 205)

Based on the science of balances, an analytical tool to analyze the gnostic music of the Alevi was devised in my 1989 book. Correspondences were established between pairs of concepts such as *Batın* in gnosticism and "stability" in music theory; *Zahir* and "change;" *Şeriat* and "formal stability;" *Hakikat* and "structural stability"; *Tarikat* and "spontaneous change;" *Marifet* and "conscious change." In other words, the dichotomy between music that follows the quatrain form and music that rebuilds its own episodic structure at every performance situation was likened to the dichotomy between the gateways of *Şeriat* and *Hakikat*, while the difference between change that comes through a process of variations and change effected through a technique of quotations was likened to the symmetry between the gateways of *Tarikat* and *Marifet*.

Using this analytical tool, whole maps of four *Mi'raçlama* performances were drawn, showing which gateway is the determining one in the balance of a given episode. These maps benefit us in two ways: (a) They indicate the sequence in which gateways are used. In the four examples analyzed and mapped, this sequence turned out to be *Şeriat-Tarikat-Marifet-Hakikat*, a sequence that, in all Alevi-Bektaşi teachings, is offered as the right path to truth. (b) They also teach us what an episode is, how an episode is built.

The latter information took the studies towards a more globalized inquiry into musical traditions that use episodic structures. During fieldwork in 1991 in the Uttar Pradesh district of India, among the Shi'ite Moslems, on Moharram rituals, I learned of the *soz* genre, which is very little known in, or researched by, the scholarly community in the West.

Just as the *Mi'raçlama* stands alone among the liturgy of the Alevi of Turkey, I was looking for a genre that would be considered a peculiarity among the liturgical music of the Shi'ites of India. With the assistance of Dr. Riza Rizvi, an eminent anthropologist who is a Shi'ite and a descendent of the Imam Riza, I discovered there is an immense repertoire of *soz*, cherished by some Shi'ite communities and rejected by others. Soz performances are indeed controversial among the Shiites of India: those clergymen under Iranian influence will avoid being present in a *majlis* gathering when a *sozhani* is singing.

The lyrics of the soz repertoire are Islamic, yet, the music is not organized according to the concepts of the *makam* system, the way all other Indian Shiite liturgy is; instead, a set of concepts of the Hindu musical tradition are at work in its fabric. So, the genre does not fall in either of these puristic blocs (i.e. Islamic or Hinduistic) of religious liturgy.

The soz is often sung by the *mirasi* who, according to the special *karma* given to their caste, are entitled to sing in any music tradition. Each *mirasi* family has its distinct repertoire of chants that they guard jealously and pass on only to their descendents. Their marginality is enforced through their own deliberate efforts. *Mirasi* families usually attach themselves to a higher caste family and take care of various ritual observances of that household. When the master *mirasi* dies, the next generation of his family goes on catering to the ritualistic needs of the same patron family's next generation, even if the latter have lost their material wealth.

A transfer of special music skills within a family, as a legacy, constitutes an alternative field of education, alongside the more standardized, universal instruction of music. In both the Turkish and Indian cases being studied, a special music education system for members of an elite household is observed.

recorded example 1: *Mi'raçlama* of the Shah Hatayi, sung by Ali Metin
recorded example 2: *Mi'raçlama* of the Shah Hatayi, sung by Durmuş Genç
recorded example 3: *salám* in rag Bhopali; tin taal, sung by Lallan Khan, Benares (*Salám* is a sub-genre of *soz* that is used in liturgical practices during the Shi'ite Muslim month of mourning, the Muharram.)

Example 3 will be studied in three aspects:
(a) sound, (b) time and (c) structure, which will be compared to similar features in the *Mi'raçlama.*

(a) **Sound.** The sound production of the *sozhan,* Lallan Khan, is in imitation of the Indian reed instrument the *shehnai.* In Muharram mourning, string instruments, for instance the *sarangi* which is very popular among Indian Muslims, are avoided for having too pleasant a sound quality.

Only percussion and winds with a loud sound are allowed because of their association with warfare, a reference to the battle in which the Imam Hussein was killed.

Since the *Mi'raçlama* is not related to any mourning occasion, its chanters are not restricted in their sound production. The "theme A" that characterizes the opening of every episode has even a jubilant, trumpet-like sound to it.

As to pitch material, the piece is built with the characteristic modules of the *rag Bhopali* of Indian music:

module a

module b

cadential modules:
module c

module d

As it can be judged from the chart showing an inventory of the modules, the way in which a module acquires a novel musical outline at each appearance is an unmistakable sign of Indian music.

This modular character is also present in the *Mi'raçlama* . Four modules are found which, in the course of the analysis, become part of the defining characteristics of each "gateway." Exactly like in the *salàm,* each time a module reappears, it features a novel musical outline

The singing style of the *salàm* is the ornamented, florid, *khayal* style with extensive *melisma*'s. Only lines 5 and 6 of the rubai poem are composed mostly syllabically. In turn, the *Mi'raçlama* is sung in a mostly syllabic story-telling style which borders on the recitative.

b) Time. The temporal organization of the piece follows the *tin-taal* of Indian music. The first two *avarta* (that is, *taal* cycles) move with a sparse texture. The following ones are less sparse. From *avarta* 7 to the end, the texture becomes quite dense. So, a change of temporality "from sparse to dense" characterizes the piece.

The tri-partite overall organization of the *Mi'raçlama* is also exactly built on this "sparse to dense" pattern.

c) Structure. The first structural feature of the *salàm* piece worthy of attention is the unevenness in the rapport between the *rubai* form of the poetry and the deployment of the *taal*. The structure is episodic like that of the *Mi'raçlama*. In both traditions, an episode opens with an "*incipit*," and goes on with a section where various elements are consecutively used to produce various "balances," to proceed to the *incipit* of the next episode. There is also a concept of overlapping of episodes: it is as though the episode goes on forever, but we abandon it to go to the next one. This is a fragmentation technique.

The capacity of *incipits* to open a new episode is due mostly to quotations they contain. For instance, in the incipit of the present *salám* example, mention is made of a "shy cupbearer who quenches the thirst of others..." This statement contains the quotation of a story from the Imam Hussein's childhood, when the Prophet Mohammad, his grandfather, requested a glass of water from Hussein. Rushing to the upper floor with the glass in hand, the child slipped and his toe started to bleed... He, therefore, stood in front of his grandfather with his right foot over the left one, to hide the source of his shame. This line is used, at all three incipits of the example, to create a feeling of opening. As a matter of fact, the piece ends on one of these openings.

Summarizing, one can see that some traits that exist in a marginal manner in the musical liturgy of both the Alevi of Turkey and the Sh'ites of India, are mainstream elements of Indian music, such as, the art of inventing a plethora of melodies from an abstract module, the predilection for episodic structures, the tri-partite

organization of a piece, and the caste character of the transmission of traditional skills.

There is a lot to be learned about Alevi-Bektaşi gnosticism through studies of Shaivism, Brahminism, Vaishism and Buddhism. What can be called a "belt of gnosticism," extending from Southern Europe to Turkey, through Iran and reaching India, offers great potential if it were to be scrutinized in its integrity.

References

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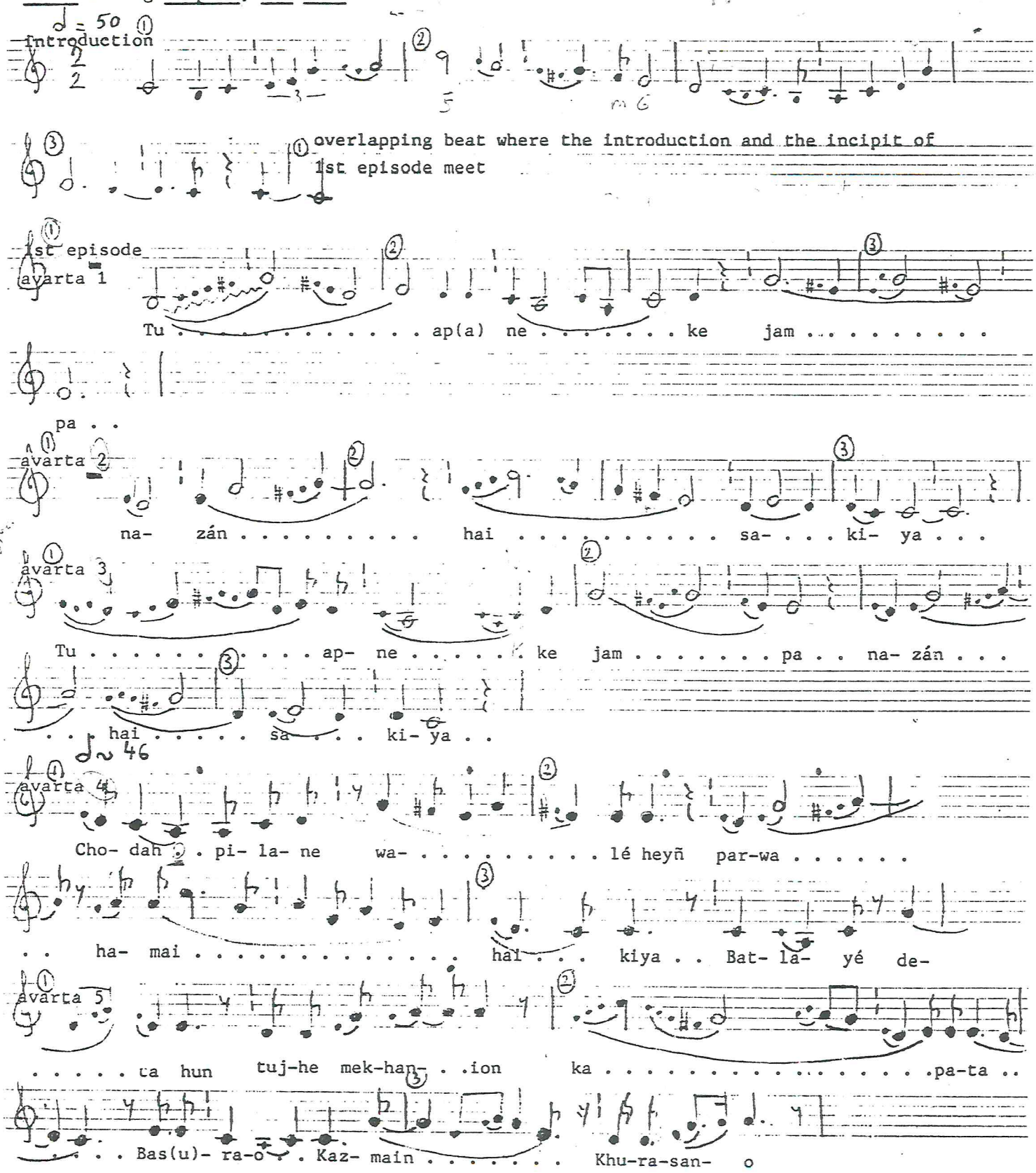
Salám in rag Bhopali; tin taal

♩ = 50
Introduction
overlapping beat where the introduction and the incipit of 1st episode meet
1st episode
avarta 1
Tu . . . . . ap(a) ne . . . . . ke jam . . . . . pa . .
avarta 2
na- zán . . . . . hai . . . . . sa- . . . ki- ya . . .
avarta 3
Tu . . . . . ap- ne . . . . . ke jam . . . . . pa . . na- zán . . .
. . hai . . . . . sa . . . ki- ya . .
♩ ~ 46
avarta 4
Cho- dah . pi- la- ne wa- . . . . . lé heyñ par-wa . . . . . .
. . ha- mai . . . . . hai . . . kiya . . Bat- la- yé de-
avarta 5
. . . . . ca hun tuj-he mek-han- . .ion ka . . . . . .pa-ta . .
. . . Bas(u)- ra-o . . Kaz- main . . . . . Khu-ra-san- o